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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and evaluates three wholly integrated classroom programs at Robert Morris College in Pittsburgh, in two different writing/communication curriculums, involving the students' creation of a portfolio as an organic and expanding set of inter-related narrations, written and spoken, based on constant, though diversified reflections of both self and the texts. One of the courses was an existing first-semester first year expository writing course, which included a narrated discovery of the students' own selves or defined their most important community in an essay; and the second course was a new intercultural communication course for sophomore level students that was piloted by a number of the faculty members in the communication skills program, beginning in the fall 1996 term. Core assignments for the course were generated from a group project in which a team of students were to investigate a culture, its history, language, customs, and arts. The third section of the course sequence moved the work into a more professional rhetoric utilizing multimedia classrooms--using computers, PowerPoint graphics software, advanced projector systems, sound applications, and cameras. The students create a new series of documents and speeches to better perform in and inform their complex world. Students in all of the classes created portfolios, which could be termed analogies of self, by combining oral and written presentations, along with journals and self-evaluations, and chronological sets of inventions through to drafts. (CR)

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Seeing Ourselves Reflected in Our Narratives:

Studies in Culture and Communication

Objective: To describe and evaluate three wholly integrated classroom programs, in two different writing/communication curriculums, involving the students' creation of a Portfolio as an organic and expanding set of inter-related Narrations, written and spoken, based on constant, though diversified Reflections of both self and the texts.

During the 1996-1997 academic year, I taught the three class curriculums in questions - one was a revision of many standard courses in First-Year, First Term Expository Writing and the other two were completely new courses for sophomores (or higher) in what is being called the Communication Skills program at Robert Morris College in Pittsburgh. The first new course was built around, not Multi-Cultural but, Inter-Cultural Communications. The follow up focused on Professional Writing, Speaking, Listening and Reading for all the students. All are required classes for all students within their college. The College Writing course followed a set of college guidelines but its individual strategies and tactics are my design while the Inter-Cultural and Professional courses' structures, and much of their style, had been constructed by design sub-committees and the larger Faculty Evaluation and Implementation Committee (FEIC), of which I am a member. In fact, I was also a part of the design committee for the Professional course. Both the First-year and the Inter-Cultural courses included a Metacogntive Journal, the Professional has at least one comprehensive Self-Assessment, while all of them had writing workshop sessions and

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progressive essay assignments which culminated in each student selecting and editing a Portfolio of their own material.

The three paralleling classroom curriculums can also demonstrate and articulate an over-reaching philosophy system with has elements of many critical and pedagogical theories. Much of what I will speak about today involves Flowers and Hayes' work in cognitive development, along with others in Heuristics, the process of Writing, and its evaluation. There is also use of some other schools like Austin Wright's and Wayne Booth's Neo-Aristotlian work in Fiction or Narrative and Rosenblatt's Transactional theory of Literature, with Literature here defined as any communicative text either written or spoken. This definition is not a compromise of Literature since, from its earliest forms, we have told our stories with our voices. This entire enterprise is founded, in fact, on the premise that using Narration, where the meaning is 'in' neither the text or the reader but the circumstance of the communication, is a basic human quality. By Reflection on each text and its circumstance, the communication and meanings deepen.

One of these courses is an existing first semester First-Year Expository Writing course. As you see, or hear, it is very much along traditional Composition pedagogical lines. Its basic requirements of Narrative, Definition, Comparison, and Argumentative essays are easily adapted to telling stories of self, defining an individual's community, and so on. These all may be brought together to form a text which they are constantly revising. We did so by establishing a Reflective community. That may sound like we all jumped if exposed to sunlight - so let me explain. We opened each of our assignment cycles by reading common texts, looking for their meanings and styles, and creating discussion/discursive points for our own community analysis on issues like belonging or identity. From that, the students then, for example, Narrated a Discovery of their own Self or Defined their most important Community in an essay.

Let me spend a little time on the Definition of Self or Community essays. These seemingly simple sounding assignments soon became daunting tasks for the student writers. Most quickly realized that their own subjective view of themselves or what ever place or people they considered their home would have to be articulated into objective terms. They were told to imagine the audience as not friends or even classmates but people who would only know these core realities of the writer through the essay. This forced a great deal of self-examination, but also self-discovery.

The second course is a new Inter-Cultural Communication course for sophomore level students that was piloted by a number of us in the Communication Skills program at Robert Morris during the Fall 1996 term and has since been repeated each term. Each of us in the piloting team chose our own variations of a central curriculum designed by the FEIC (committee). I taught two more sections of the course in the Spring 1997 term with a few distinct changes. As designed, the students are to explore the dynamics of Cultures and Co-Cultures with particular emphasis on the bridges and barriers to their mutual understanding. As is often the case, they found themselves reflected in the faces of others and better learn about both sides.

One of the initially required assignments was to have students do an active listening essay based on a videotaped speech by a non-native speaker of English. Instructors had about a dozen speeches, done on campus with International students, to choose from for the assignment. They had been rated by the design team as being of Low, Medium, or High difficulty. It was planned that the students, who are for the most part local people from the Pittsburgh area, would be formally introduced to the skills of listening in an Inter-Cultural and Inter-Linguistic world. Despite using practice sessions and class discussions, this assignment seemed to increase tensions within the classroom.

During the Spring term, I tried a modification of the assignment. Instead of providing a speaking, but non-interactive speaker, all my students were assigned to

find and interview a non-US speaker of English about their observations concerning the American use of the language. For some, they found native speakers of English, but from other countries so their reports were full of comparisons in dialect, style, and meaning. Others learned from those who had to learn English as a second, or even fifth language, so their reports were full of differences in structure, syntax, protocols and sometimes shocking, binding similarities. This time, the students had possession of their own learning and awakening to the issues.

In this course, many of the core assignments (speech, essay, listening, etc.) were generated from a major group project in which a team of four to six students were to investigate, not just research, a culture, its history, language, customs, arts, and so on. The groups developed both a long written report and a 10 to 20 minute presentation. This assignment, while already reaching many of its goal in collaborative learning, experience in writing/editing and presenting in a group, and fact finding about the Cultures, should continue to improve as information, case studies, and data about the Communication issues between Cultures increase.

The last section of this course sequence moves the work in collaborative/community communication into a more professional rhetoric with utilizing multimedia classrooms. Using computers, PowerPoint graphics software, advanced projector systems, sound applications, and cameras, the students create a new series of documents and speeches to better perform in and inform their complex world.

A vital contextualization for this course has to made at the very beginning of the term. By Professional, we do not mean simply "Business" communications. Otherwise, the course's defining terms may quickly make the students in liberal arts, sciences, or education, as examples, see this as irrelevant to their education. Instead, Professional has the same weight and value as Inter-Cultural - these are the communication systems of anyone in a professional world with most any career, just as these are issues for people living in an Inter-Cultural world.

There are both collaborative and individual projects resulting in both oral and written presentations/reports. The major pedagogical switch from the previous Communications Skills course is that the group work comes as predecessor to the individual. The major project is a case study/analysis of a real world Communications Dynamics and/or Ethics situation. This allows for the individual student to find a topic well suited to their own career interests. Furthermore, the rest of the class will learn from these diverse studies during the oral presentations. The sharing of information and broadening of horizons continues through their peers' work. The listeners also provide samples of summaries and evaluations of what they hear which, conversely, are used to assess how well they did the listening. The major assignments from this class, and others if the student wishes, are gathered into a Final Portfolio at the end of the term which they then can use in future classes - and hopefully on job interviews. The course has been in constant use since its debut in Spring 1997 and we who have nurtured it along continue to do our work for the FEIC.

The students in all of the classes create Portfolios, which could be termed Anthologies of Self, by combining oral and written presentations, along with Journals in the first two courses and Self-Evaluations in the third, and chronological sets of inventions through to drafts, throughout the term. The oral presentations are not only reports to the community on their thoughts and/or research, but can also be spoken drafts for the writing assignments.

Using the metacognitive Journals and Self-Evaluations in which they were to explore their own writing and thinking, the students did much of what Flower and Hayes called the "thinking aloud" protocols. But it was also to extenuate their writing process by establishing a forum for, again in Flower and Hayes' terms, the three subprocesses in PreWriting - Generating, Organizing, and Goal Setting.

With the use of Invention workshops for topics and strategies, peer draft workshops, and editing workshops, we also did a great deal in Reflecting for both

sections in Flower and Hayes' idea of Rewriting as Editing and Revision. This use of collaborative teams becomes more defined in the upper division classes, as it probably will in the students own lives beyond college.

With the many workshops and, especially, the collaborative teams, each student was consistently confronted by more feedback or input than from themselves and the teacher's grades. They worked on what Donald Murray called external, for audience, and internal, for our ownselves, Revision. These Narratives must speak clearly and truthfully to both Author and Reader.

Grading for all assignments, written or spoken, was holistic and the students were encouraged to see their collaborative reflective time as a holistic evaluation of the work. What we looked for were not, as Mina Shaughnessy wrote about years ago, as errors, but as "patterns" in the language and logic of the individual and, where pertinent, the group.

The various texts in all of the courses are brought back into focus throughout the term so that the students' Reflection could become part of their act of creating and sharing their Narrations of ideas, emotions, and insights about communication, their topics, and themselves. In these ways, the dynamics of a writer and an audience and the necessary development of awareness and strategies are fostered within their own Narrative Worlds.